

The Tell-Tale Heart



by Edgar Allan Poe

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The Tell-Tale Heart: Introduction

One of Edgar Allan Poe’s most famous short stories, “The Tell-Tale Heart,” was first published in the

January, 1843 edition of James Russell Lowell's *The Pioneer* and was reprinted in the August 23, 1845 issue of *The Broadway Journal*. The story is a psychological portrait of a mad narrator who kills a man and afterward hears his victim's relentless heartbeat. While "The Tell-Tale Heart" and his other short stories were not critically acclaimed during his lifetime, Poe earned respect among his peers as a competent writer, insightful literary critic, and gifted poet, particularly after the publication of his famous poem, "The Raven," in 1845.

After Poe's death in 1849, some critics faulted his obsession with dark and depraved themes. Other critics, like George Woodberry in his 1885 study of Poe, considered "The Tell-Tale Heart" merely a "tale of conscience." But this simplistic view has changed over the years as more complex views of Poe and his works have emerged. Poe is now considered a forefather of two literary genres, detective stories and science fiction, and is regarded as an important writer of psychological thrillers and horror.

"The Tell-Tale Heart" is simultaneously a horror story and psychological thriller told from a first-person perspective. It is admired as an excellent example of how a short story can produce an effect on the reader. Poe believed that all good literature must create a unity of effect on the reader and this effect must reveal truth or evoke emotions. "The Tell-Tale Heart" exemplifies Poe's ability to expose the dark side of humankind and is a harbinger of novels and films dealing with psychological realism. Poe's work has influenced genres as diverse as French symbolist poetry and Hollywood horror films, and writers as diverse as Ambrose Bierce and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

The Tell-Tale Heart: Overview

Summary

"The Tell-Tale Heart" was first published in 1843 in the *Boston Pioneer*, and revised into its current form for an 1845 edition of *The Broadway Journal*. Like "The Black Cat," it is a murder story told by the acknowledged killer himself. Here, however, the narrator's stated purpose is not confession but the desire to prove his "sanity."

The dramatic monologue begins with the unnamed (and highly unreliable) first-person narrator issuing a challenge of sorts: "True!—nervous, very, very dreadful nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?" He declares at once that he suffers from a "disease," but implies that because it has not dulled his senses, he cannot be called mad. The narrator points out that his mental disorder has actually caused his senses, especially his hearing, to become more acute. When he claims to have heard many things in heaven and hell, we realize, of course, that his super-human sensory experiences are delusions. But having posited (and immediately undercut) the first argument in his proof, the narrator turns to a second plank. The calm manner in which he will now tell us the whole story is in itself evidence of his sound mind.

The narrator says that he cannot recall when the idea of killing the old man "entered" his "brain." He never discloses the exact nature of his relationship to the victim. The old man and his killer seem to live in the same house, and this would suggest a family bond of some kind, and, from here, a father-son relation with ample room for subconscious motives. But the narrator conspicuously omits direct confirmation that the old man is his father (or uncle, etc.), saying only that he loved his victim and that he did not covet the old man's wealth. In mid-sentence, as if he just realized it (or made it up), the narrator declares that it was one of the old man's eyes, a pale-blue, film-covered eye like that of a vulture, that he could not stand. As if jogging his own memory (or, again, making it up on the spot), the narrator further recollects that when this "evil eye" fell upon him, his blood ran cold.

The motive established, the narrator proceeds to recount the cunning deliberation, the caution, that he used in preparing to take the old man's life, submitting it as evidence of his rationality. To allay any suspicions that

his intended victim might have, the narrator greeted the old man each morning during the week before the crime with encouraging words, asking him about how he had slept the night before. But each midnight as the old man slept, the narrator carefully lifted the latch on his bedroom door, moved his head inside the room itself, and opened a lantern's shutter so slightly that only a narrow beam of light pinpointed the "vulture" eye. For seven nights in a row, the deed could not be committed because the "accursed" eye was closed.

On the eighth night, however, an opportunity (to hear the killer tell it) arose. Moving as slowly as the hands of a clock, he opened the bedroom door and felt a sense of exhilaration at the thought that the old man did not even dream that a foul deed was afoot. Unable to suppress his glee, the narrator chuckled aloud, causing the old man to shift suddenly in his sleep, as if he were startled. But the narrator says that he was not concerned since the room was pitch black, its shutters closed tight against thieves. This time, he slipped his head in as usual, but when his thumb slipped on the lantern shutter, the sound caused the old man to spring up in his bed and to cry out "Who's there." The narrator does not take this to be a blunder on his part. Instead, he describes his delight in being able to read the old man's mind. Laying back down, the old man groaned, and the narrator somehow knew that this was not an expression of pain or grief, but one of mortal terror, terror of the kind that he himself had experienced. The narrator reports following the old man's mind as he tried to reason away the sound as merely a gust of wind or a mouse moving across the floor. But the old man could not comfort himself, the narrator knows, for he could feel the presence of Death (with a capital "D") hovering near him.

On this night, the narrator recounts, the "evil eye" is wide open, and when the lantern's rays illuminate it, the mere sight of cloudy orb infuriates him. Through his superhuman hearing, the narrator says that he is able to detect the old man's heart beat growing faster and louder, so loud, in fact, that the narrator feared a neighbor would be awakened. Yet after resolving that the "old man's hour has come," the narrator himself yells out before leaping fully into the room and causing his victim to shriek. The cunning narrator killed the old man by dragging him to the floor and pulling the bed over his victim. Whether the old man was crushed or smothered, the narrator was certain that he was dead, but that his heart continued to beat. Again, the killer is not concerned: the sound was not loud enough to be heard by neighbors. Indeed, the narrator recalls, it stopped altogether and when he placed his hand upon the old man's chest, he concluded that his victim was "stoned dead."

The narrator then details the perfection of his plan. He disposed of the corpse by dismembering the body, cutting off the old man's head, legs and arms. He took some planks up from the bedroom floor, dumped all of the remains below in the space below, and then replaced the boards so that no human eye could ever detect that they had been disturbed. The narrator anticipates the listener's objections that some blood must have been shed in the process, but he gleefully reports, "I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all—ha, ha!"

At four in the morning, three policemen came to the house. A neighbor had heard a shriek in the night, the police explained, and they wanted to search the premises. The narrator says that this did not worry him. He told the officers that the shriek was his outburst from a bad dream. The narrator led the investigating party into the old man's bedchamber, provided chairs for them to sit, and placed his own chair directly atop the boards concealing his victim's remains. Although he was convinced by their light conversation that the police were satisfied by his account, when they did not leave, the narrator developed a headache, and then felt a ringing in his ears. He became even more anxious when the noise grew and was convinced that it came from outside of himself. According to the narrator, his actions began to betray him: he began to pace the floor, to race, and even to foam at the mouth. He became convinced that the police could hear the sound of the old man's heart but said nothing, thereby making "a mockery of my horror." Unable to stand the agony of being ridiculed, the narrator called the detectives "villains," admitted to his crime, and directed them to the source of the sound. When they picked up the planks, so the narrator tells us, they found the old man's "hideous heart" still beating away.

Analysis

The narrator clearly fails to make the case that he is not insane, but is ironically accurate in his expectation that we will say that he is mad once we've heard him out. His efforts are, in fact, pathetic, and while there are some dramatic moments in the story, the tension that moves the tale forward is not how or when the narrator will act, but the disparity between the story as he tells it and the likelihood of what may have taken place.

We do not question that some heinous crime has occurred, but just about everything else that the narrator says evokes doubt. The narrator repeatedly boasts that he has carefully planned his crime and carried it out with caution. Yet on the eighth night, he commits not one but two mechanical blunders, and not only does he allow the old man to shriek in fright, he actually yells as he assaults his victim. The manner in which he kills the old man is ludicrous: he takes no weapon with him into the old man's room, and somehow dispatches of the old man with a piece of furniture. Indeed, it seems as if the murder took place on a spur of the moment impulse.

His effort to conceal the body by hiding under the scene of the crime are equally ridiculous; the dismemberment of the corpse does nothing to conceal the murder, his use of a tub to catch the blood is by no means the cunning method that he takes it to be. Among the questions that abound at the story's end, despite the narrator's explicit account, we cannot say for sure whether he acted out before the police, or merely thought his behavior to be suspicious. In fact, given that the narrator hears things from the outside that are clearly sourced in his deranged mind, we very much doubt that the old man's heart was still beating hours after his death. Because the narrator is so unreliable, we are essentially invited by Poe to reconstruct an alternative series of events, but we are limited in this by what the narrator chooses to tell us.

The Tell-Tale Heart: Edgar Allan Poe Biography

Edgar Allan Poe was born into a theatrical family on January 19, 1809. His father, David Poe, was a lawyer-turned-actor, and his mother, Elizabeth Arnold, was an English actress. Both his parents died before Poe turned three years old, and he was raised by John Allan, a rich businessman, in Richmond, Virginia. Allan never legally adopted Poe, and their relationship became a stormy one after Poe reached his teenage years.

Edgar Allan Poe

Unlike the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” who claims that he had no desires for the old man’s gold, Poe was dependent on Allan for financial support. While Allan funded Poe’s education at a private school in England for five years, he failed to support him when he attended the University of Virginia and the United States Military Academy at West Point. Aware that he would never inherit much from his prosperous foster father, Poe embarked on a literary career at the age of twenty-one.

In 1835, Poe secretly married his thirteen-year-old cousin, Virginia Clemm. For the next two years, he worked as an assistant editor for the *Southern Literary Messenger* while publishing fiction and book reviews. He was ill-suited for editorial work. Like his natural father, Poe was an alcoholic. Dismissed by his employer, Poe moved to New York City and later to Philadelphia. He published several works, including “The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym” in 1838, “The Fall of the House of Usher” in 1839, and “The Tell-Tale Heart” in 1843. While his writings were well regarded, his financial position was constantly precarious. Poe took on a series of editorial positions, but his alcoholism and contentious temper continued to plague him. In 1845 Poe published “The Raven,” his most famous poem. Celebrated as a gifted poet, he failed to win many friends due to his unpleasant temperament. After his wife’s death from tuberculosis in 1847, Poe became involved in a number of romances, including one with Elmira Royster that had been interrupted in his youth. Now Elmira was the widowed Mrs. Shelton. It was during the time they were preparing for their marriage that Poe, for reasons unknown, arrived in Baltimore in late September of 1849. On October 3, he was discovered in a state of semiconsciousness. He died on October 7 without being able to explain what had happened during the last days of his life.

Upon Poe’s death in 1849, his one-time friend and literary executor, R. W. Griswold, wrote a libelous obituary in the *New York Tribune* defaming Poe by attributing the psychological conditions of many of his literary characters to Poe’s own state of mind. Most critics, however, contend that there is nothing to suggest that Poe psychologically resembled any of his emotionally and mentally unstable fictitious characters. Indeed, he took pride in demonstrating his keen intellect in his “tales of ratiocination.”

The Tell-Tale Heart: Summary

“The Tell-Tale Heart” begins with the famous line “True!—nervous—very, very nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad?” The narrator insists that his disease has sharpened, not dulled, his senses. He tells the tale of how an old man who lives in his house has never wronged him. For an unknown reason, the old man’s cloudy, pale blue eye has incited madness in the narrator. Whenever the old man looks at him, his blood turns cold. Thus, he is determined to kill him to get rid of this curse.

Again, the narrator argues that he is not mad. He claims the fact that he has proceeded cautiously indicates that he is sane. For a whole week, he has snuck into the man’s room every night, but the victim has been sound asleep with his eyes closed each time. The narrator cannot bring himself to kill the man without seeing his “Evil Eye.” On the eighth night, however, the man springs up and cries “Who’s there?” In the dark room, the narrator waits silently for an hour. The man does not go back to sleep; instead, he gives out a slight groan, realizing that “Death” is approaching. Eventually, the narrator shines his lamp on the old man’s eye. The narrator immediately becomes furious at the “damned spot,” but he soon hears the beating of a heart so loud that he fears the neighbors will hear it. With a yell, he leaps into the room and kills the old man. Despite the murder, he continues to hear the man’s relentless heartbeat.

He dismembers the corpse and hides the body parts beneath the floorboards. There is a knock on the front door; the police have come to investigate a shriek the neighbors have reported. The narrator invites them to search the premises. He blames his scream on a bad dream and explains that the old man is not home. The officers are satisfied but refuse to leave. Soon the sound of the heartbeat resumes, growing more and more distinct. The narrator grows pale and raises his voice to muffle the sound. At last, unable to stand it any

longer, the narrator screams: “I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!”

The Tell-Tale Heart: Characters

Narrator

The narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” recounts his murder of an old man. Since he tells the story in first-person, the reader cannot determine how much of what he says is true; thus, he is an unreliable narrator. Though he repeatedly states that he is sane, the reader suspects otherwise from his bizarre reasoning, behavior, and speech. He speaks with trepidation from the famous first line of the story:

“True—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad?” The reader soon realizes through Poe’s jolting description of the narrator’s state of mind that the protagonist has in fact descended into madness. The narrator claims that he loves the old man and has no motive for the murder other than growing dislike of a cloudy film over one of the old man’s eyes. Poe effectively conveys panic in the narrator’s voice, and the reader senses uneasiness and growing tension in the narrative. Through the first-person narrative of a madman, Poe effectively creates a gothic tale full of horror and psychological torment, a style he termed “arabesque.”

Old Man

The old man is known to readers only through the narration of the insane protagonist. According to the narrator, the old man had never done anything to warrant his murder. However, the old man’s cloudy, pale blue eye bothers the narrator tremendously. The narrator believes that only by killing the old man can he get rid of the eye’s overpowering malignant force. The old man is apparently quite rich, for he possesses “treasures” and “gold” and he locks the window shutters in his room for fear of robbers. However, the narrator states that he has no desire for his gold. In fact, he claims that he loves the old man. Through the narrator, the reader understands the horror that the old man experiences as he realizes that his companion is about to kill him. The narrator claims that he too knows this horror very well. Some critics argue that the old man must have known about the narrator’s violent tendencies, for he cries out in horror well before the narrator kills him. Other critics suggest that the old man may have been the narrator’s guardian or even father. Still other critics believe that the old man is a doppelganger for the narrator, that is, he is his double, and the narrator’s loathing for the man represents his own self-loathing.

The Tell-Tale Heart: Themes

Guilt and Innocence

The guilt of the narrator is a major theme in “The Tell-Tale Heart.” The story is about a mad person who, after killing a companion for no apparent reason, hears an interminable heartbeat and releases his overwhelming sense of guilt by shouting his confession to the police. Indeed, some early critics saw the story as a straightforward parable about self-betrayal by the criminal’s conscience.

The narrator never pretends to be innocent, fully admitting that he has killed the old man because of the victim’s pale blue, film-covered eye which the narrator believes to be a malignant force. The narrator suggests that there are uncontrollable forces which can drive people to commit violent acts. In the end, however, Poe’s skillful writing allows the reader to sympathize with the narrator’s miserable state despite fully recognizing that he is guilty by reason of insanity.

Sanity and Insanity

Closely related to the theme of guilt and innocence is the issue of sanity. From the first line of the story—“True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am, but why *will* you say that I am mad?”—the reader recognizes that something strange has occurred. His obsession with conveying to his

audience that he is sane only amplifies his lack of sanity. The first tangible sign that the narrator is indeed mad appears in the second paragraph, when he compares the old man's eye to a vulture's eye. He explains his decision to "take the life of the old man" in order to free himself from the curse of the eye. The narrator's argument that he is sane, calculating, and methodical is unconvincing, however, and his erratic and confused language suggests that he is disordered. Thus, what the narrator considers to be evidence of a sane person—the meticulous and thoughtful plans required to carry out a ghastly and unpleasant deed—are interpreted instead by the reader to be manifestations of insanity.

Time

A secondary theme in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is the role of time as a pervasive force throughout the story. Some critics note that the narrator is obsessed with time. While the entire narrative is told as one long flashback, the narrator is painfully aware of the agonizing effect on him of time. Although the action in this narrative occurs mainly during one long night, the numerous references the narrator makes to time show that the horror he experiences has been building over time. From the beginning, he explains that his obsession with ridding the curse of the eye has "haunted [him] day and night." For seven long nights the narrator waits for the right moment to murder his victim. When on the eighth night the old man realizes that someone is in his room, the narrator remains still for an entire hour. The old man's terror is also felt by the narrator, who had endured "night after night hearkening to the death watches in the wall." (Death watches are a type of small beetle that live in wood and make a ticking sound.)

For the narrator, death and time are closely linked. He explains that "the old man's hour had come," all the while painfully aware of the hours it takes to kill a victim and clean up the scene of the crime. What drives the narrator over the edge is hearing the overwhelming sound of a heartbeat, which he compares to "a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton." Yet after killing the old man, the narrator says that for "many minutes, the heart beat on." He repeats his comparison of the heartbeat to a ticking watch as the unrelenting sound drives him to confess to the police. The narrator's hour has also arrived.

The Tell-Tale Heart: Style

Point of View

A notable aspect of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is that the story is told from the first-person point of view. The story is a monologue of a nervous narrator telling the reader how he murdered someone. He is eventually driven to confess to the police. The entire straightforward narrative is told from his point of view in a nervous tone. Through Poe's masterful and inventive writing, the narrator's twisted logic increasingly reveals that he is insane. By using a first-person narrative, Poe heightens the tension and fear running through the mind of the narrator. There is a clear connection between the language used by the narrator and his psychological state. The narrator switches between calm, logical statements and quick, irrational outbursts. His use of frequent exclamations reveals his extreme nervousness. The first-person point of view draws the reader into the mind of the insane narrator, enabling one to ironically sympathize with his wretched state of mind. Some critics suggest that the entire narrative represents a kind of confession, as at a trial or police station. Others consider the first-person point of view as a logical way to present a parable of self-betrayal by the criminal's conscience—a remarkable record of the voice of a guilty mind.

Denouement

The denouement, or the resolution, of the narrative occurs in "The Tell-Tale Heart" when the narrator, prompted by the incessant sound of a beating heart, can no longer contain his ever-increasing sense of guilt. Poe is regarded by literary critics as having helped define the architecture of the modern short story, in which its brevity requires an economical use of sentences and paragraphs and the climactic ending often occurs in the last paragraph. The abrupt ending in this story is calculated to concentrate an effect on the reader. In

“The Tell-Tale Heart” the crisis of conscience is resolved when the murderer shrieks the last lines of the story: “I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!” This abrupt outburst is a shock to the reader, a sudden bursting of the tension that has filled the story, and it provides the dramatic, emotional conclusion to the story.

Aestheticism and Arabesque

Poe was a writer concerned more with style and mood than his American contemporaries were, like James Fenimore Cooper whose fiction was often morally didactic. Poe believed that a story should create a mood in a reader, or evoke emotions in order to be successful, and that it should not try to teach the reader a lesson. He called his style “arabesque,” and it was notable for its ornate, intricate prose that sought to create a feeling of unsettlement in the reader. This arabesque prose became a primary component of the “art for art’s sake” movement, known as Aestheticism, that began in France in the nineteenth century. Poe’s works were highly esteemed by French writers, like the poet Charles Baudelaire, and their emulation of his style eventually influenced the Symbolists and helped bring an end to the Victorian age in literature. In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” an example of arabesque prose is when the narrator describes sneaking into the old man’s room in the middle of the night: “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.” Instead of simply stating that he had heard a groan, the narrator describes the sound in detail, creating in the reader a sense of suspense and foreboding.

Doppelganger

In literature, a doppelganger is a character that functions as the main character’s double in order to highlight the main character’s personality or act as a foil to it. Some critics have maintained that in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the old man functions as a doppelganger to the narrator. Thus, the narrator is truly mad, and he kills the old man because he cannot stand himself, perhaps fearing becoming old or disfigured like him. The narrator recounts evidence to support this idea: he does not hate the man, in fact, he professes to love him; on the eighth night when the narrator sneaks into his room, the old man awakens, sits bolt upright in bed and listens in silence for an hour in the darkness, as does the narrator. Most notably, when the old man begins to moan, the narrator admits that the same sound had “welled up from my own bosom” many nights. When he hears the man’s heart quicken with terror, he admits that he is nervous, too. Other critics have maintained that the old man does not exist. After all, the narrator tells police that it was he who screamed, and it is not stated that the police actually found a body. According to this viewpoint, the old man’s cloudy eye is nothing more than a twisted fixation of the narrator’s own mind, and the relentless heartbeat is not the old man’s, but the narrator’s.

The Tell-Tale Heart: Historical Context

Literature in the 19th Century

Poe wrote at a time when the United States was experiencing rapid economical and geographical expansion. During the mid-nineteenth century, the most popular authors in the growing United States were those who wrote adventure fiction. American nautical explorations (particularly of the Pacific region) and westward expansion captured the imagination of the public. Such Poe stories as “A Descent into the Maelstrom” and “The Gold Bug” reflect the public’s fascination with adventures at home and abroad. Poe’s America was a vibrant and self-assured young nation with a firm belief in its manifest destiny. James Fenimore Cooper’s [The Last of the Mohicans](#), which outlined the moral struggles of an expanding country, was a moral tale that pitted the white man against Native Americans. [Herman Melville](#) was a favorite with readers, with his novels of sea-faring life, which often paled in comparison to the adventures of his own youth. Long, action-oriented novels such as these were a primary form of entertainment for many people. [Washington Irving](#) who lived and wrote in the emerging metropolis of New York City, began to catalogue some of the arising American folklore in his tales and stories, although he frequently traveled in Europe to gather material for his writing

and followed a traditional British format in his prose. Novels in this era typically imitated British literature until new themes arose from authors who were distinctly American. Poe was one of the first to create a distinctly American literature. In his short stories, particularly, he sought to fashion tales of terror based on mood and language. He also helped popularize the short story form, and soon many magazines were being published that provided their audiences with new stories every month. The magazines became an important part of popular life, and Poe published many stories in them, though few brought him solid popularity. Through his short stories, especially “Murders in the Rue Morgue” Poe became one of the first practitioners of the detective story, in which a mystery is presented that must be solved by an observant inspector, whose viewpoint is also that of the reader’s.

Psychological Elements of Poe’s Fiction

Historians note that Poe’s writings emphasizing the dark side of humanity and nature challenged the optimistic and confident spirit of the American people during the nineteenth century. Scientific progress and rational thought were revolutionizing industry and agriculture. For example, such nineteenth-century creations as steamships expanded commerce, while steel plows and the McCormick reapers increased agricultural production manifold. Poe, like other writers of his time, was influenced by the exaggerated emotions and sombre moods of [Romanticism](#) but he differs from his contemporaries in a number of ways. While Poe does not reject rational science (his “tales of ratiocination” herald the triumph of the superior rational mind), he undermines the faith in rationality in some of his stories. “The Tell-Tale Heart” tells of a man who ironically (and perhaps also paradoxically) strongly believes in the need for making methodical and calculated decisions but is eventually overcome by inexplicable psychological forces that stem from his irrational, unstable nature. Thus, while Poe’s works display a strong interest in rational science, his writings also explore the psychologically unfathomable aspects of the human condition and the inexplicable elements of the universe.

Poe differs from writers of his time in one other significant way. “The Tell-Tale Heart” is an example of how his writing produces a psychological effect. While his contemporaries generally regarded a story’s moral or ideological position as paramount, Poe believed that the aim of literature is to reveal truth or elicit an emotional or psychological reaction. Poe also rejected the emphasis by his contemporaries on the utilitarian value of literature. He considered their ideological view a “heresy of the Didactic.” Instead, Poe proposed an ideology of “art for art’s sake,” with style and aesthetics playing prominent roles. Literary critics and historians now consider Poe as one of the architects of the modern short story. Indeed, Poe proposes that a short literary work can use its brevity to concentrate a unified effect on the reader. Poe’s precise and controlled language works to produce a particular effect on the reader. Writers of poetry and short fiction since Poe have generally acknowledged his maxim as fundamental. Poe’s works have influenced many writers, including Baudelaire and Ambrose Bierce, and such literary movements as the French Symbolists and Surrealists.

The Tell-Tale Heart: Critical Overview

During his lifetime, Poe’s greatest recognition came from France. Charles Baudelaire translated and commented on Poe’s stories in the 1850s. Baudelaire was a famous French writer in his own right, and his translations are considered by a few critics to be superior to Poe’s original prose. These translations popularized Poe in France bringing him wide fame and influence. In the later half of the nineteenth century, the psychological aspects of Poe’s writings influenced French Symbolist poets. In the United States, however, Poe was often criticized for his stories. Many writers thought that they were overly emotional and contained no good lessons or stories. Poe never made much money from his fiction, although he had limited success as a poet.

In the generations since his death, however, critics have come to fully appreciate Poe's works. His poetry continues to be popular, and he is now regarded as an early master of the short story, particularly for his contributions to the detective and horror genres, of which "The Tell-Tale Heart" is a prime example. One of the reasons why he is so highly regarded is because his stories are open to so many different interpretations, a factor that was not appreciated in his day. Contemporary critics acknowledge that "The Tell-Tale Heart" can be read as a classic example of American Gothicism, a morality tale, a supernatural story, a criticism of rationalism, and a multi-level psychological narrative. The full dimension and nuances of this tale are explored in James Gargano's "The Theme of Time in 'The Tell-Tale Heart.'" Gargano proposes that "The Tell-Tale Heart" is more complicated than it might first appear because Poe laces the story with "internally consistent symbols that are charged with meaning" and because the narrator is unreliable, causing the reader to question the veracity of his story. E. Arthur Robinson explores the idea of the doppelgänger in his essay "Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" claiming that the narrator and the old man identify closely with each other and arguing that beneath the flow of the narration, "the story illustrates the elaboration of design which Poe customarily sought."

While two of Poe's stories, "MS. Found in a Bottle" and "The Gold Bug" were critically well received, each winning a prize during Poe's lifetime, "The Tell-Tale Heart" obtained no special recognition. Poe's contemporaries accorded him respect as a talented poet, literary critic and fiction writer. Some of his works received a measure of popular success, particularly "The Raven," his most well known poem, which was first published in 1845. However, temperamentally unpleasant and a chronic alcoholic, Poe did not handle his success well, alienating some of his potential supporters.

Some early critics saw the psychologically unbalanced state of his fictional characters as an extension of Poe's own mental state. His literary executor, R. W. Griswold, wrote a libelous obituary in the *New York Tribune* vilifying him as mentally depraved. Even as late as 1924, critic Alfred C. Ward, writing about "The Tell-Tale Heart" in *Aspects of the Modern Short Story: English and American* argued that Poe "had ever before him the aberrations of his own troubled mind—doubtfully poised at all times, perhaps, and almost certainly subject to more or less frequent periods of disorder: consequently, it was probably more nearly normal, for him, to picture the abnormal than to depict the average." Other early critics considered stories such as "The Tell-Tale Heart" basically self-explanatory. One nineteenth century critic, George Woodberry, simply called it a "tale of conscience" in his 1885 study, *Edgar Allan Poe*.

Although "The Tell-Tale Heart" did not receive much recognition during the author's lifetime, its status has gained steadily since his death. Now among one of his most widely read works, the tale adds to Poe's reputation as an innovator of literary form, technique, and vision. Almost every important American writer since Poe shows signs of his influence, particularly those writing gothic fiction and grotesque satires and humor.

The Tell-Tale Heart: Essays and Criticism

The First-Person Narrative Viewpoint in the "Tell-Tale Heart"

The use of an unreliable first-person narrator in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" serves a number of crucial functions. By telling this story from the viewpoint of a deranged major character, Poe provides us with insight into that character's motivation in committing murder as well as his purpose in relating it to the reader, justifies the "open-ended" resolution of the story's plot, and above all, intensifies the dramatic impact of his tale. True, "The Tell-Tale Heart" could have been recounted from an alternative perspective, that of an omniscient third-person narrator, for example. But, as will be brought out in this brief study, had the author

chosen this course, character motivation would not have been as sharply etched as it is, the plot's unusual form would have proven confusing, and the dramatic power of the tale would have been diminished.

There can be little doubt that the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is unreliable, and is, in fact, deranged. In the very first sentence of the work, the speaker confesses that he is "dreadfully nervous" and even allows that he has a "disease." He apparently suffers from some form of paranoia or persecution complex. But whatever diagnosis that the reader makes of Poe's narrator, it is plain that the chief character of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is, in fact, mentally imbalanced. It is not merely that he commits a murder without a rational motive that convinces the reader of this. Instead, it is that by telling of the crime from a first-person point of view, the reader is forced to notice the vast internal contradictions that push Poe's narrator forward. At one point, the speaker claims that he pities old man his "mortal terror," but then immediately adds "although I chuckled at heart." At another pivotal point in story, the main character examines the old man's corpse thoroughly. He is convinced and, in turn convinces the reader, that the old man is "stone dead." Yet he will later act under the belief that the old man's heart still beats. What is clear, then, is that as the reader "listens" to the narrator, he is hearing the words of a madman.

The particular standpoint from which the "Tell-Tale Heart" is told provides the reader with insight into the major character's motivation in carrying out the murder and in telling us about it. Significantly, in the first sentence the narrator says that he "had been and am" nervous. This means that he was insane at the time the events that he describes took place and in the "present," the time of the story's narration. No object or passion stood behind the chief character's heinous deed. He allows that he even "loved" the old man. Later the narrator speaks of the "mortal terror" that has "many a night, just at midnight...it has welled up from my own bosom." The reason for the crime lies exclusively in the narrator's disturbed mind.

The narrative persona of "The Tell-Tale Heart" seems to have a hidden agenda in conveying his story to the reader. His purpose in laying open the details of his crime is to convince the reader of his sanity. When he points the reader's attention toward "how calmly I can tell you the whole story," his aim is to demonstrate a mental soundness that he seems to believe must present within him since he has been able to enact a complicated murder with a diligent eye for detail. This hidden agenda comes across unmistakably when the narrator states: "If you think me mad, you will not longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body." The fact that an account of a gruesome dismemberment follows undercuts the narrator's aim of convincing us that he is sane. In a sense, the narration of the tale is a part of the crime itself.

Poe's use of an unreliable first-person point of view, also offers a basis for the resolution of the story and its open-ended form. The murderer's scheme unravels when a deputation of police come to the old man's house after a neighbor hears the sole scream that the victim issues. Ironically, the murderer during his carefully wrought crime has dismissed the scream altogether and, instead, has focused entirely on the sound of the beating heart, assuring himself that it "can't be heard through the wall." As he take the officers through the house, he is obviously deluded in thinking that his strange behavior will convince them of his innocence. The effect, of course, is exactly the opposite: it is his manner, more than the scream itself, that raises the suspicions of the police.

The plot's resolution comes in the form of the narrator's furtive confession as he himself exposes the evidence of the murder. Indeed, "The Tell-Tale Heart's" unorthodox form, especially its abrupt ending can be explained by the fact that it is told from the viewpoint of a person who is not "all there" or "whole" himself. If "The Tell-Tale Heart" ends abruptly (as it does), this can be attributed to the imbalanced mind of the narrative persona, for it is he who chooses the point at which the tale will end.

It is extremely interesting to see the narrator as he attempts to change the story's point of view. At several point in "The Tell-Tale Heart" the narrator tries to shift the perspective to a second-person point of view as when he says "You should have seen me," or, "Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it

(his head) in" to the old man's room. His claimed insight into the reader's mind is, of course, a form of self-deception; the reader is not as "sick" as the narrator takes him to be. The fact that we do not share the same relish for the way in which he has planned and carried out the murder, while he believes that we ""should," merely underscores just how "sick" the narrator is.

Even more relevant to the story's resolution, the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" acts as if he had the selective omniscience of a third-person narrator. Approaching the old man's bed on the night of the crime, the narrator claims to know what his victim "had been saying to himself." Later, his extension of this bogus claim to omniscience plays a key part in the unravelling of the deed. The narrator comes to believe that he can see into the minds of the officers who arrive at the old man's house. In the last full paragraph of the story we read: "Yet the officers heard not... Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God!—No, No!" In both cases, the narrators' futile efforts to take on a perspective outside his natural first-person viewpoint cannot be sustained. He fails to develop a bond with the reader to advance his hidden agenda, and he falters badly in trying to probe what the police officers are thinking as they interrogate him, or, more precisely, as he interrogates himself.

The use of a deranged first-person narrator amplifies the dramatic impact of the tale and this takes place through the story's visual, aural, and poetical dimensions. Because he sees the crime carried out from the narrator's perspective, the reader's imagination is concentrated upon the same visual elements with which the narrator is obsessed. Chief among these is the old man's cataract-covered vulture's eye. Indeed, the narrator asserts that he delays the commission of his crime for a week because he cannot carry out murder when vulture eye is closed. By using this point of view, then, Poe "makes" the reader see as the narrator sees. Extraneous details, the physical appearance of the old man, of the narrator, of the scene of the crime, are pushed into the background or absent altogether. The reader must "look" upon only that which the narrator elects to show him.

The narrator also claims that he has a supernaturally acute sense of hearing. It is by virtue of this extraordinary power that the narrator explains his ability to "hear" the old man's heart beating even after the victim is stone dead. Again, because the tale is related from the viewpoint of a first-person narrator, we also "hear" as the narrator hears, and this concentrates our attention on the key aural aspects of the story, the beating of the heart, by excluding others. In fact, going back over "The Tell-Tale Heart" we realize that not a single word of dialogue is spoken by a character other than the narrator.

Finally, because "The Tell-Tale Heart" is related to the reader in the voice of a madman, the author is able to insert dramatically effective, even lyrical, phrases into the text. There are several points where the narrator, seemingly reliving his crime, heightens dramatic tension by repeating a word, as in "cautiously, oh, so cautiously," "a very, very little crevice," and "how stealthily, stealthily." By doing so, Poe elevates the reader's tension, forcing him to "wait" for the next turn of events and he gives these passages a poetic rhythm that would have seemed forced or false had the author used a third-person point of view.

In conclusion, then, the use of a deranged first-person narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" performs several key functions. This particular point of view gives us insight into the workings of the chief characters mind, particularly his motive in killing the old man and his reason for telling the reader about it. When the speaker's false claims to selective omniscience fall apart and, in fact, contribute to his downfall, the value of the first-person narrative mode in "The Tell-Tale Heart" comes across even more forcefully. Most importantly, the first-person narrative perspective furnishes "The Tell-Tale Heart" with heightened dramatic power as the reader is compelled to "see" what the narrator sees (or wants him to see) and to "hear" what the narrator hears (or wants him to hear). Rendered from some other viewpoint, that of a third-person omniscient narrator "closer" to the author himself, "The Tell-Tale Heart" would amount to a report of an irrational crime and would be deprived of much of its potency.

The Twin and the Doppelganger

A salient feature in many of Edgar Allan Poe's stories is the concept of a nemesis appearing as a *doppelganger*. A *doppelganger* is a double—an apparitional twin or counterpart to another living person. In Poe's stories involving a *doppelganger*, the protagonist identifies closely with the antagonist and vice versa. The double appears in such stories as "The Purloined Letter," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "The Tell-Tale Heart." The idea of the protagonist fighting a counterpart occurs so often in Poe's works that critics often suggest that it indicates Poe's attempts to work out, through his writings, his own inner conflicts and psychological struggles.

The identification of the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" with the old man is a primary motif in the story. Many times throughout the story, the narrator says that he knows how the old man feels. He claims to know the groans of the old man, and that he too had experienced the same moans—not of pain or sadness but of mortal terror. It is a terror which "arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe." The narrator says: "I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my bosom, deepening, with its echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say I knew it well. I know what the old man felt..." The narrator knows such fearful restlessness first hand: "He (the old man) was still sitting up in the bed, listening;—just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches in the wall." Thus the narrator and the old man are on such equal footing that they seem almost like the same person.

Ostensibly, the protagonist has no rational reason for wanting to kill the old man. Indeed, he claims the old man has never done him wrong and that he loves him and does not want his money. Why, then, is there a need for murder? "Object there was none. Passion there was none," says the narrator. Neither does the narrator explain how or why exactly the old man's "pale blue eye, with a film over it" bothers him so greatly. In fact he only *thinks* it was the eye that first prompted him with murderous thoughts: "I think it was his eye! yes, it was this!" Critic Charles E. May, however, interprets the "eye" not as an organ of vision but as the homonym of "I." Thus, what the narrator ultimately wants to destroy is the self, and he succumbs to this urge when he could no longer contain his overwhelming sense of guilt.

The idea of knowing the antagonist so well as to know his every move reappears in "The Purloined Letter," a story about two long-time nemeses, Dupin and Minister D. In this story, Minister D. steals a compromising letter from the Queen, and Dupin attempts to recover the letter. Minister D. blackmails the Queen by threatening to divulge to the King the information gained from the letter. The Queen's agents are unable to find the letter because they assume that the Minister thinks like them. Dupin, however, finds the letter because he knows the Minister well enough to know how he thinks. He sets up his nemesis for a fall when he replaces the letter with a counterfeit one, thereby endangering the Minister's life when he attempts to blackmail the Queen with a worthless note. Dupin claims that he accomplishes all this because he shares the same intellect and interests as the Minister—they possess the same poetic yet mathematical mind. Dupin knows Minister D. so intimately that he knows how to hold his interest in a meeting while stealing back the letter from under his nose.

In Poe's works involving protagonists and *doppelgangers*, the characters exist in a moral vacuum. Poe's concerns with aesthetics, style, and effect on the reader override concerns with moral issues. In the struggle between Dupin and Minister D., the reader never knows whether Dupin is working for the "right" political cause. The reader assumes that the Queen has committed an imprudent deed and suspects that there is something very undemocratic about the police working directly for the Queen in what may be a partisan political struggle. But political positions are immaterial in Poe's morally ambiguous stories. The fact that Dupin could possibly be aiding a corrupt or undemocratic faction while Minister D. could be a rebellious politician and brave with anti-monarchical goals is not really an issue with Poe. He never advocates a political

or moral position or suggests which is the “correct” one. Poe rejected the position of many of his contemporaries who valued the utilitarian nature of literature and who also believed that literature should be instructive and provide moral guidance. Poe called their ideological position “the heresy of the didactic.” Poe’s writing aims at a concentrated effect on or emotional response from the reader; the moral positions of the protagonist, antagonist, or other characters do not play a prominent role in the stories. Morally, therefore, the protagonist and his double are identical. The elimination of the *doppelgänger* becomes a destruction of a moral twin—sometimes a self-destructive act.

The idea of the nemesis as twin reappears in “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Roderick Usher is so close to his twin sister, Madeline, that the two are said to share one consciousness. In this tale, the narrator is visiting Roderick, a childhood friend who has fallen on hard times. Roderick announces that his sister is dead and entombs her in a coffin in the basement. But the narrative hints that she is still alive, for she expresses “a faint blush” even as the narrator and Roderick close the lid to her coffin. She appears to be suffering from catalepsy, a condition which causes muscle rigidity and an appearance of death. When she mysteriously awakens from her catatonic state late one night, she walks to her terrified brother and falls on him. Roderick and his twin then collapse, both dead. Roderick understands exactly how Madeline feels and acts; there are strong psychological and sexual links between the two. The narrator implies that the Usher family survives only via incest; Roderick and Madeline are the last members of this accursed house. Some critics thus interpret Roderick’s act of entombing Madeline alive as an attempt to end this curse. The similarities and links between Roderick and Madeline are too obvious to dismiss. One of Roderick Usher’s paintings features a burial vault lit from within, as if he knows about a life-force emanating from inside a coffin. Roderick loves his sister like no other. Their birth and death occur at the same time. Both siblings emit feelings of gloom and doom. Madeline appears wraithlike, as if she is just an apparition. Roderick too appears deathlike and feels his sister’s every move and presence; when he announces that she is outside the door and has come for him, she appears exactly as he predicts. The elimination of one sibling thus spells the end of the other. Indeed, after entombing his sister, Roderick becomes more agitated, wild, and fearful, realizing fully that his time too has arrived.

If the two siblings are in fact one in spirit, then their actions may also be interpreted as suicide rather than murder. Poe does not concern himself with the moral actions of the characters in “The Fall of the House of Usher”; the narrator feels no immediate guilt for having aided in the entombment of a person who may possibly be alive. The story seeks primarily to stir fear in the reader, with the issue of morality marginalized. The characters operate in an inscrutable universe where all of them, particularly the protagonist and the *doppelgänger*, are equally amoral.

Returning to “The Tell-Tale Heart,” one can thus argue that the murder becomes an act of suicide and that the protagonist and the antagonist are moral equals. Taking this argument one step further, one can suggest that the two characters could well be the same person. Ostensibly, the police find no trace of an old man in the house. The narrator has hidden him so well that the old man may exist only in the narrator’s mind. Some critics imply that the beating heart is really the sound of the narrator’s own heartbeat. As his excitement, nervousness, and guilt mount, his heartbeat seems to grow louder to his overly acute senses. In the end, the narrator tells the police that he was the one who shrieked, waking himself up from a nightmare and a dreamlike logic as well as destroying an enemy which might not have existed.

Critics who have studied Poe sometimes suggest that his characters resemble him both physically and temperamentally. Similarities can be seen between physical descriptions of Roderick Usher—particularly his pale face and large luminous eyes—and of photographs (daguerreotypes) of Poe. Parallels can also be drawn between the conflicts between the protagonists and antagonists in Poe’s works and Poe’s difficult financial and emotional relationship with his foster father, John Allan. Such conflicts in his writings as the struggles of the protagonist against the *doppelgänger* and overwhelming inexplicable natural forces represent a therapeutic banishment of Poe’s own inner demons and psychological struggles.

Source: John Chua, "Overview of 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 1998. Chua is a multimedia associate with the National Council of Teachers of English.

Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart"

Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" consists of a monologue in which an accused murderer protests his sanity rather than his innocence. The point of view is the criminal's, but the tone is ironic in that his protestation of sanity produces an opposite effect upon the reader. From these two premises stem multiple levels of action in the story. The criminal, for example, appears obsessed with defending his psychic self at whatever cost, but actually his drive is self-destructive since successful defense upon either implied charge—of murder or of criminal insanity—automatically involves admission of guilt upon the other.

Specifically, the narrator bases his plea upon the assumption that madness is incompatible with systematic action, and as evidence of his capacity for the latter he relates how he has executed a horrible crime with rational precision. He reiterates this argument until it falls into a pattern: "If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for concealment of the body." At the same time he discloses a deep psychological confusion. Almost casually he admits lack of normal motivation: "Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man." Yet in spite of this affection he says that the idea of murder "haunted me day and night." Since such processes of reasoning tend to convict the speaker of madness, it does not seem out of keeping that he is driven to confession by "hearing" reverberations of the still-beating heart in the corpse he has dismembered, nor that he appears unaware of the irrationalities in his defense of rationality.

At first reading, the elements of "The Tell-Tale Heart" appear simple: the story itself is one of Poe's shortest; it contains only two main characters, both unnamed, and three indistinguishable police officers; even the setting of the narration is left unspecified. In the present study my object is to show that beneath its narrative flow the story illustrates the elaboration of design which Poe customarily sought, and also that it contains two of the major psychological themes dramatized in his longer works.

It is important to note that Poe's theory of art emphasizes development almost equally with unity of effect. There must be, he insists, "a repetition of purpose," a "dropping of the water upon the rock;" thus he calls heavily upon the artist's craftsmanship to devise thematic modifications of the "preconceived effect." A favorite image in his stories is that of arabesque ornamentation with repetitive design. In "The Tell-Tale Heart" one can distinguish several such recurring devices filling out the "design" of the tale, the most evident being what the narrator calls his "over acuteness of the senses." He incorporates this physical keenness into his plea of sanity: "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." He likens the sound of the old man's heart to the ticking of a watch "enveloped in cotton" and then fancies that its terrified beating may arouse the neighbors. His sensitivity to sight is equally disturbing, for it is the old man's eye, "a pale blue eye, with a film over it," which first vexed him and which he seeks to destroy. Similar though less extreme powers are ascribed to the old man. For example, the murderer congratulates himself that not even his victim could have detected anything wrong with the floor which has been replaced over the body, and earlier he imagines the old man, awakened by "the first slight noise," listening to determine whether the sound has come from an intruder or "the wind in the chimney." Variations such as these give the sensory details a thematic significance similar to that of the "morbid acuteness of the senses" of Roderick Usher in "The Fall of the House of Usher" or the intensity with which the victim of the Inquisition hears, sees, and smells his approaching doom in "The Pit and the Pendulum."

These sensory data provide the foundation of an interesting psychological phenomenon in the story. As the characters listen in the darkness, intervals of strained attention are prolonged until the effect resembles that of

slow motion. Thus for seven nights the madman enters the room so “very, very slowly” that it takes him an hour to get his head through the doorway; as he says, “a watch’s minute-hand moves more quickly than did mine.” When on the eighth night the old man is alarmed, “for a whole hour I did not move a muscle.” Later he is roused to fury by the man’s terror, but “even yet,” he declares, “I refrained and kept still. I scarcely breathed.” On different nights both men sit paralyzed in bed, listening for terrors real or imagined. After the murder is completed, “I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes.” In the end it seems to his overstrained nerves that the police officers linger inordinately in the house, chatting and smiling, until he is driven frantic by their cheerful persistence.

This psychological process is important to “The Tell-Tale Heart” in two ways. First, reduplication of the device gives the story structural power. Poe here repeats a dominating impression at least seven times in a brief story. Several of the instances mentioned pertain to plot, but others function to emphasize the former and to provide aesthetic satisfaction. To use Poe’s words, “by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale, its thesis, has been presented unblemished....” Here Poe is speaking specifically of “skilfully-constructed tales,” and the complementary aspects of technique described are first to omit extraneous material and second to combine incidents, tone, and style to develop the “pre-established design.” In this manner, form and “idea” become one. The thematic repetition and variation of incident in “The Tell-Tale Heart” offer one of the clearest examples of this architectural principle of Poe’s at work.

Second, this slow-motion technique intensifies the subjectivity of “The Tell-Tale Heart” beyond that attained by mere use of a narrator. In the psychological triad of stimulus, internal response, and action, the first and third elements are slighted and the middle stage is given exaggerated attention. [In a footnote, the critic notes: Joseph Warren Beach in *The Twentieth-Century Novel* (New York, 1932), p. 407, describes a similar effect in stream-of-consciousness writing: “The subjective element becomes noticeable in fiction, as in everyday psychology, when an interval occurs between the stimulus to action and the resulting act.” In extreme application of this technique, he declares, “there is a tendency to exhaust the content of the moment presented, there is *an infinite expansion of the moment*,” and he adds that the danger is that “there may come to pass a disintegration of the psychological complex, a divorce between motive and conduct” (p. 409). This is close to the state of Poe’s narrator and murderer]. In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” stimulus in objective sense scarcely exists at all. Only the man’s eye motivates the murderer, and that almost wholly through his internal reaction to it. The action too, though decisive, is quickly over: “In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him.” In contrast, the intermediate, subjective experience is prolonged to a point where psychologically it is beyond objective measurement. At first the intervals receive conventional description—an “hour,” or “many minutes”—but eventually such designations become meaningless and duration can be presented only in terms of the experience itself. Thus, in the conclusion of the story, the ringing in the madman’s ears first is “fancied,” then later becomes “distinct,” then is discovered to be so “definite” that it is erroneously accorded external actuality, and finally grows to such obsessive proportions that it drives the criminal into an emotional and physical frenzy. Of the objective duration of these stages no information is given; the experience simply “continued” until “at length” the narrator “found” that its quality had changed.

Through such psychological handling of time Poe achieves in several of his most effective stories, including “The Tell-Tale Heart,” two levels of chronological development which are at work simultaneously throughout the story. Typically, the action reaches its most intense point when the relation between the objective and subjective time sense falters or fails. At this point too the mental world of the subject is at its greatest danger of collapse. Thus we have the mental agony of the bound prisoner who loses all count of time as he alternately swoons and lives intensified existence while he observes the slowly descending pendulum. The narrator in “The Pit and the Pendulum” specifically refuses to accept responsibility for objective time-correlations: “There was another interval of insensibility; it was brief; for, upon again lapsing into life,

there had been no perceptible descent in the pendulum. But it might have been long; for I knew there were demons who took note of my swoon, and who could have arrested the vibration at pleasure.” These demons are his Inquisitional persecutors, but more subjective “demons” are at work in the timeless terror and fascination of the mariner whirled around the abyss in “The Descent into the Maelstrom,” or the powerless waiting of Usher for days after he first hears his sister stirring within the tomb. In each instance the objective world has been reduced to the microcosm of an individual’s experience; his time sense fades under the pressure of emotional stress and physical paralysis.

Even when not literally present, paralysis often may be regarded as symbolic in Poe’s stories. In [The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym](#) (1838), Pym’s terrifying dreams in the hold of the ship represent physical and mental paralysis: “Had a thousand lives hung upon the movement of a limb or the utterance of a syllable, I could have neither stirred nor spoken.... I felt that my powers of body and mind were fast leaving me.” Other examples are the “convolutions” of bonds about the narrator in “The Pit and the Pendulum,” the death-grasp on the ring-bolt in “The Descent into the Maelstrom,” the inaction of Roderick and (more literally) the catalepsy of Madeline Usher, and in part the supposed rationality of the madman in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” which turns out to be subservience of his mental to his emotional nature. In most applications of the slow-motion technique in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” three states of being are present concurrently: emotional tension, loss of mental grasp upon the actualities of the situation, and inability to act or to act deliberately. Often these conditions both invite and postpone catastrophe, with the effect of focusing attention upon the intervening experience.

In the two years following publication of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” Poe extended this timeless paralysis to fantasies of hypnosis lasting beyond death. “Mesmeric Revelation” (1844) contains speculations about the relation between sensory experience and eternity. In “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” (1845) the hypnotized subject is maintained for nearly seven months in a state of suspended “death” and undergoes instant dissolution when revived. His pleading for either life or death suggests that his internal condition had included awareness and suffering. Similarly the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” records: “Oh God! what *could* I do? I foamed—I raved—I swore!”—while all the time the police officers notice no foaming nor raving, for still they “chatted pleasantly, and smiled.” His reaction is still essentially subjective, although he paces the room and grates his chair upon the boards above the beating heart. All these experiences move toward ultimate collapse, which is reached in “The Tell-Tale Heart” as it is for Usher and the hypnotized victims, while a last-moment reprieve is granted in “The Pit and the Pendulum” and “The Descent into the Maelstrom.”

A second major theme in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is the murderer’s psychological identification with the man he kills. Similar sensory details connect the two men. The vulture eye which the subject casts upon the narrator is duplicated in the “single dim ray” of the lantern that falls upon his own eye; like the unshuttered lantern, it is always one eye that is mentioned, never two. One man hears the creaking of the lantern hinge, the other the slipping of a finger upon the fastening. Both lie awake at midnight “hearkening to the death-watches in the wall.” The loud yell of the murderer is echoed in the old man’s shriek, which the narrator, as though with increasing clairvoyance, later tells the police was his own. Most of all the identity is implied in the key psychological occurrence in the story—the madman’s mistaking his own heartbeat for that of his victim, both before and after the murder.

These two psychological themes—the indefinite extension of subjective time and the psychic merging of killer and killed—are linked closely together in the story. This is illustrated in the narrator’s commentary after he has awakened the old man by an incautious sound and each waits for the other to move:

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 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 had been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions: but he had found all in vain.

Here the slow-motion technique is applied to both characters, with emphasis upon first their subjective experience and second the essential identity of that experience. The madman feels compelled to delay the murder until his subject is overcome by the same nameless fears that have possessed his own soul. The groan is an "echo" of these terrors within. The speaker has attempted a kind of catharsis by forcing his own inner horror to arise in his companion and then feeding his self-pity upon it. This pity cannot prevent the murder, which is a further attempt at exorcism. The final two sentences of the paragraph quoted explain why he believes that destruction is inevitable:

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.

The significance of these sentences becomes clearer when we consider how strikingly the overall effect of time-extension in "The Tell-Tale Heart" resembles that produced in Poe's "The Colloquy of Monos and Una," published two years earlier. In Monos's account of dying and passing into eternity, he prefaces his final experience with a sensory acuteness similar to that experienced by the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart." "The senses were unusually active," Monos reports, "though eccentrically so." As the five senses fade in death, they are not utterly lost but merge into a sixth—of simple duration:

Motion in the animal frame had fully ceased. No muscle quivered; no nerve thrilled; no artery throbbed. But there seems to have sprung up in the brain ... a mental pendulous pulsation.... By its aid I measured the irregularities of the clock upon the mantel, and of the watches of the attendants.... And this—this keen, perfect, self-existing sentiment of *duration* ... this sixth sense, upspringing from the ashes of the rest, was the first obvious and certain step of the intemporal soul upon the threshold of the temporal Eternity.

Likewise the old man in "The Tell-Tale Heart" listens as through paralyzed, unable either to move or to hear anything that will dissolve his fears. This resembles Monos' sensory intensity and the cessation of "motion in the animal frame." Also subjective time is prolonged, becomes partially divorced from objective measurement, and dominates it. The most significant similarity comes in the conclusion of the experience. The old man does not know it but he is undergoing the same dissolution as Monos. He waits in vain for his fear to subside because actually it is "Death" whose shadow is approaching him, and "it was the mournful influence of that shadow that caused him to feel" his destroyer within the room. Like Monos, beyond his normal senses he has arrived at a "sixth sense," which is at first duration and then death.

But if the old man is nearing death so too must be the narrator, who has felt the same "mortal terror" in his own bosom. This similarity serves to unify the story. In Poe's tales, extreme sensitivity of the senses usually signals approaching death, as in the case of Monos and of Roderick Usher. This "over acuteness" in "The Tell-Tale Heart" however, pertains chiefly to the murderer, while death comes to the man with the "vulture eye." By making the narrator dramatize his feelings in the old man, Poe draws these two motifs together. We must remember, writes one commentator upon the story, "that the criminal sought his own death in that of his victim, and that he had in effect become the man who now lies dead." [Patrick F. Quinn,

The French Face of Edgar Poe (Carbondale, Illinois, 1957). p. 236. Quinn makes this identity the theme of the story, without describing the full sensory patterns upon which it is based.] Symbolically this is true. The resurgence of the beating heart shows that the horrors within himself, which the criminal attempted to identify with the old man and thus destroy, still live. In the death of the old man he sought to kill a part of himself, but his “demons” could not be exorcised through murder, for he himself is their destined victim.

From this point of view, the theme of “The Tell-Tale Heart” is self-destruction through extreme subjectivity marked paradoxically by both an excess of sensitivity and temporal solipsism. How seriously Poe could take this relativity of time and experience is evident in the poetic philosophy of his *Eureka* (1849). There time is extended almost infinitely into the life-cycle of the universe, but that cycle itself is only one heartbeat of God, who is the ultimate subjectivity. Romantically, indeed, Poe goes even further in the conclusion to *Eureka* and sees individual man becoming God, enclosing reality within himself, and acting as his own creative agent. In this state, distinction between subjective and objective fades: “the sense of individual identity will be gradually merged in the general consciousness.” Destruction then becomes self-destruction, the madman and his victim being aspects of the same universal identity. Death not only is self-willed but takes on some of the sanctity of creative and hence destructive Deity. The heartbeat of the red slayer and the slain merge in Poe’s metaphysical speculations as well as in the denouement of a horror story.

This extreme subjectivity, moreover, leaves the ethical problem of “The Tell-Tale Heart” unresolved. In the opening paragraph of the story is foreshadowed an issue of good and evil connected with the speaker’s madness: “I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad?” To be dramatically functional such an issue must be related to the murder. The only outward motivation for the murder is irritation at the “vulture eye.” It is the evil of the eye, not the old man (whom he “loved”), that the murderer can no longer live with, and to make sure that it is destroyed he will not kill the man while he is sleeping. What the “Evil Eye” represents that it so arouses the madman we do not know, but since he sees himself in his companion the result is self-knowledge. Vision becomes insight, the “Evil Eye” an evil “I,” and the murdered man a victim sacrificed to a self-constituted deity. In this story, we have undeveloped hints of the self-abhorrence uncovered in “William Wilson” and “The Imp of the Perverse.”

Poe also has left unresolved the story’s ultimate degree of subjectivity. No objective setting is provided; so completely subjective is the narration that few or no points of alignment with the external world remain. From internal evidence, we assume the speaker to be mad, but whether his words constitute a defense before some criminal tribunal or the complete fantasy of a madman there is no way of ascertaining. [The critic adds in a footnote that ‘Despite lack of objective evidence, “The Tell-Tale Heart” bears much resemblance to a dream. The narrator acknowledges that the murdered man’s shriek was such as occurs in dreams, and his memory of approaching the old man’s bed upon eight successive midnights has the quality of a recurring nightmare. Poe frequently couples madness and dreaming, often with the variant “opium dreams,” as in “Ligeia” and “The Fall of the House of Usher.” “The Black Cat” a companion piece published the same year as “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843), opens with an explicit denial of both madness and dreaming. The introductory paragraph of “Eleonora” (1842) runs the complete course of madness—dreams—death—good and evil: “Men have called me mad; but the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence: whether much that is glorious, whether all that is profound, does not spring from disease of thought—from *moods* of mind exalted at the expense of the general intellect. They who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night. In their gray visions they obtain glimpses of eternity, and thrill, in awaking, to find that they have been upon the verge of the great secret. In snatches, they learn something of the wisdom which is of good, and more of the mere knowledge which is of evil.’”] The difference, however, is not material, for the subjective experience, however come by, is the story. Psychologically, the lengthening concentration upon internal states of being has divorced the murderer first from normal chronology and finally from relationship with the “actual” world. The result, in Beach’s words, is “disintegration of the psychological complex.” The

victim images himself as another and recoils from the vision. Seeing and seen eye become identical and must be destroyed.

Source: E. Arthur Robinson, "Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 19, No. 4, March, 1965, pp. 369-78.

The Question of Poe's Narrators

In "The Tell-Tale Heart" the cleavage between author and narrator is perfectly apparent. The sharp exclamations, nervous questions, and broken sentences almost too blatantly advertise Poe's conscious intention; the protagonist's painful insistence in "proving" himself sane only serves to intensify the idea of his madness. Once again Poe presides with precision of perception at the psychological drama he describes. He makes us understand that the voluble murderer has been tortured by the nightmarish terrors he attributes to his victim: "He was sitting up in bed listening;—just as I have done, night after night, harkening to the death watches in the wall"; further, the narrator interprets the old man's groan in terms of his own persistent anguish: "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." Thus, Poe, in allowing his narrator to disburden himself of his tale, skillfully contrives to show also that he lives in a haunted and eerie world of his own demented making.

Poe assuredly knows what the narrator never suspects and what, by the controlled conditions of the tale, he is not meant to suspect—that the narrator is a victim of his own self-torturing obsessions. Poe so manipulates the action that the murder, instead of freeing the narrator, is shown to heighten his agony and intensify his delusions. The watches in the wall become the ominously beating heart of the old man, and the narrator's vaunted self-control explodes into a frenzy that leads to self-betrayal. I find it almost impossible to believe that Poe has no serious artistic motive in "The Tell-Tale Heart" that he merely revels in horror and only inadvertently illuminates the depths of the human soul. I find it equally difficult to accept the view that Poe's style should be assailed because of the ejaculatory and crazy confession of his narrator.

Source: James W. Gargano, "The Question of Poe's Narrators," in *College English*, Vol. 25, no. 3, December, 1963, pp. 177-81.

Edgar Allan Poe: "Tales of Mystery and Imagination"

"The Tell-Tale Heart" is one of the most effective parables ever conceived. Shorn of its fantastic details regarding the murdered man's vulture-like eye, and the long-drawn-out detail concerning the murderer's slow entrance into his victim's room, the story stands as an unforgettable record of the voice of a guilty conscience.

Despite its merit as a parable, "The Tell-Tale Heart" is marred by the insanity of the chief character. From the very first sentence his madness is apparent through his desperate insistence upon his sanity; and the preliminaries of his crime go to prove that madness. The vital weakness of Poe's stories in this kind is his repeated use of the motive of mental abnormality. Psychological fiction (and Poe was among its earliest practitioners) depends for its effect upon the study of the human mind in its conscious state—whereas insanity is, to all intents and purposes, a condition of unconsciousness.

Is it not possible to contemplate a re-writing of "The Tell-Tale Heart" in a manner which would preserve its unique character as a parable of the self-betrayal of a criminal by his conscience, while at the same time vastly increasing its interest as a story of human action? As Poe writes the story, we have the spectacle of a demented creature smothering his helpless old victim without reason or provocation, other than the instigation

of his own mad obsession: “Object there was none. Passion there was none.” This absence of motive robs the story of every vestige of dramatic interest, for it is an elementary axiom in criticism that what is motiveless is inadmissible in literary art. The provision of an adequate motive for the murder, and the subsequent commission of the murder by one who is otherwise sane, would bring the story on to the plane of credibility and dramatic interest. If the circumstances of the story were thus altered, the implacable workings of conscience and the portrayal of their cumulative influence upon the mind of the criminal, could scarcely fail to have a much more powerful effect upon the mind of the reader than is actually the case in the story as it stands.

Two things, at least, should be remembered, however, when we make these strictures in regard to Edgar Allan Poe’s work. *First*, that he had ever before him the aberrations of his own troubled mind—doubtfully poised at all times, perhaps, and almost certainly subject to more or less frequent periods of disorder: consequently, it was probably more nearly normal, for him, to picture the abnormal than to depict the average. *Second*, that literary men in general, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, were still in the trough of the wave of German romanticism, which exalted extravagant and clamorous and stormy sentimentality above the quieter, deeper, truer moods of human feeling.

Considering, then, the temperamental drawbacks by which Poe was beset, and also that the naturalistic mode in literature is the fruitage of more recent times, he should be judged by standards different from those that serve for other writers. The wonder surely is that Poe should be able still to sway modern readers with such unprepossessing material.

Source: Alfred C. Ward, “Edgar Allan Poe: ‘Tales of Mystery and Imagination,’” in *Aspects of the Modern Short Story: English and American*, University of London Press, 1924, pp. 32-44.

The Tell-Tale Heart: Compare and Contrast

- **1840s:** Mental illness is thought to be related to immoral behavior or the physical degeneration of the central nervous system. Insanity is thought to be the result of such diseases as syphilis.

1990s: After years of institutionalizing mentally ill patients and subjecting them to electroshock therapy, modern treatment of mental illness such as depression, bi-polar disorder, and schizophrenia include counseling and drug therapy.

- **1840s:** “The Tell-Tale Heart” is published in 1843. The story is a psychological thriller that invites the reader into the world of the narrator’s insanity. Other examples of Poe’s eerie, macabre style include “The Pit and the Pendulum,” written in 1842, which explores the dark side of human nature and features both cruelty and torture.

1990s: People continue to be fascinated by the dark side of humanity. The popular film *Silence of the Lambs* examines the psychological motivations of a serial killer. Best-selling author [Stephen King](#) along with other horror writers, explores the supernatural, the paranormal, and the way in which seemingly ordinary events can suddenly turn into terrifying encounters with psychotic killers.

The Tell-Tale Heart: Topics for Further Study

- Research the illnesses of schizophrenia and paranoia. Do you think the protagonist suffers from either of these conditions? Why or why not?
- Research how Manifest Destiny was a pervasive ideology in mid-nineteenth century America. How does “The Tell-Tale Heart” challenge the rationalism and optimism of a young nation?

- "‘The Tell-Tale Heart’" was written more than 150 years ago. Why do you think it is still widely read today? What are some elements of the story which make it timeless? What makes a classic literary or artistic work?

The Tell-Tale Heart: Media Adaptations

- *Listen & Read Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ and Other Stories* is an audio-cassette recording packaged with a book. Produced by Dover Press, 1996.
- "‘The Tell-Tale Heart’" was adapted into a black-and-white film starring Sam Jaffe in 1980. It is available on video from Facets Multimedia, Chicago.
- In 1934, "‘The Tell-Tale Heart’" was made into a movie entitled *Bucket of Blood* starring John Kelt as The Old Man and Norman Dryden as the protagonist.
- In 1956, producer/director Lee W. Wilder loosely adapted two of Poe’s stories, "‘The Gold Bug’" and "‘The Tell-Tale Heart,’" in his movie *Manfish*.
- In 1962, "‘The Tell-Tale Heart’" was made into a British movie by director Ernest Morris. Known as *The Tell-Tale Heart*, it also carries the alternate title *The Hidden Room of 1,000 Horrors*. It is available on video from Nostalgia Family Video.
- In 1969, "‘The Tell-Tale Heart’" was made into an animated film narrated by actor James Mason. A Columbia Pictures release, it is also available on video.
- Another audio recording is available from Downsway of Ontario, Canada. *Tales of Mystery and Horror* features the voice of actor Christopher Lee. Produced in 1981.

The Tell-Tale Heart: What Do I Read Next?

- "‘Young Goodman Brown’" (1835) by [Nathaniel Hawthorne](#) concerns a newly married man who must leave home on a short journey. While walking through the woods, he encounters the townspeople engaged in a satanic ritual. This vision destroys Goodman Brown, though it is never clear whether he actually saw the things he claimed, or just imagined them.
- "‘The Monkey’s Paw’" (1902) by W. W. Jacobs is the story about a Sergeant-Major who brings a monkey’s paw back from his travels in India. He presents it to the White family, who joke about its supposed power to grant the owner three wishes. The Whites’s careless wishes lead to tragedy and horror.
- "‘The Secret Sharer’" (1909) by [Joseph Conrad](#) is the story of a young sea captain who knowingly harbors a stowaway on his ship. The man, who has been accused of murder, serves as a doppelganger for the young captain, and gives him the courage to stand up to his crew, even though the stowaway’s life and character remain shrouded in mystery.
- Poe’s short story "‘The Fall of the House of Usher’" (1839) also explores the impulses of a deranged protagonist who entombs his sister only to find that she returns to destroy him.
- Poe’s "‘William Wilson’" also deals with the lifelong confrontation of a protagonist with a mysterious *doppelganger*, or double.

[The Turn of the Screw](#) (1898), a novella by [Henry James](#) tells the story of ghostly apparitions seen by an English governess in Victorian mansion. Some critics interpret the hallucinations as the manifestations of a repressed mind.

The Tell-Tale Heart: Bibliography and Further Reading

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The Tell-Tale Heart: Pictures

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