

Tell-Tale Heart by Edgar Allan Poe

Step by step guide

Paragraph 1: What message is the narrator desperately trying to get across? Is he convincing? Why? Why not?

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.

Paragraph 2: Describe the narrator's reaction to the old man and characterize the narrator based on the reaction.

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! 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.

Paragraph 3: How is the narrator trying to convince the reader that he is not mad? Do the qualities he mentions prove that he is not mad? Why? Why not?

Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded --with what caution --with what foresight --with what dissimulation 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, that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly --very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha! would a madman have been so wise as this, And then, when my head was well in the room, I undid the lantern cautiously--oh, so cautiously --cautiously (for the hinges creaked) --I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye. And this I did for seven long nights --every night just at midnight --but I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye. And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he has 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.

Speculation: Do you think that he will kill the old man? Why? Why not?

Paragraphs 4-6: Literature often comes to life because of the power relationship among characters. How would you characterize the power relationship between the narrator and the old man here?

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. I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was, opening the door, little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts. I fairly chuckled at the idea; and perhaps he heard me; for he moved on the bed suddenly, as if startled. Now you may think that I drew back --but no. His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness, (for the shutters were close fastened, through fear of robbers,) and so I knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept pushing it on steadily, steadily.

I had my head in, and was about to open the lantern, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the old man sprang up in 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 in the wall.

Dramatic and situational irony: Try to identify moments of irony in paragraph 4.

Paragraphs 7-9: This passage beautifully illustrates why Edgar Allan Poe was such a great writer. Which devices and techniques does he use to mesmerize and capture the reader?

Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief--oh, no!--it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart. I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been saying to himself--"It is nothing but the wind in the chimney--it is only a mouse crossing the floor," or "It is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp." Yes, he had 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, very little crevice in the lantern. So I opened it--you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily--until, at length a simple 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 or person: for I had directed the ray as if by instinct, precisely upon the damned spot.

Paragraph 10: Notice the beautiful figures of speech used by the author. (A figure of speech = a non-literal comparison used to create an effect). Good writers use powerful and fresh figures of speech.

And now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the sense? --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.

Paragraphs 11-12-13: Why does the narrator become more and more nervous? Which indications are there, that the narrator is clearly mad? How is he trying to convince the reader that he isn't mad?

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 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 neighbour! The old man's hour had come! With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked once --once only. In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done. But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length it ceased. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was stone, stone dead. I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more.

If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs.

I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings. I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye -- not even his -- could have detected any thing wrong. There was nothing to wash out -- no stain of any kind -- no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all -- ha! ha!

Paragraphs 14-15: One interesting concept which is often discussed in literature is “hubris”. (Hubris: man’s excessive pride, vanity, self-confidence – the feeling of being god-like – usually leading towards one’s own “nemesis” – your own doom) How does the narrator display his hubris in this paragraph?

When I had made an end of these labors, it was four o'clock -- still dark as midnight. As the bell sounded the hour, there came a knocking at the street door. I went down to open it with a light heart, -- for what had I now to fear? There entered three men, who introduced themselves, with perfect suavity, as officers of the police. A shriek had been heard by a neighbour during the night; suspicion of foul play had been aroused; information had been lodged at the police office, and they (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 audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim.

Paragraphs 16-18: How does the narrator's mood change? What do you think is responsible for this mood swing? What indicates once more that the narrator is in fact suffering from serious mental issues? What do the sounds symbolize?

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 definiteness --until, at length, I found that the noise was not within my ears.

No doubt I now grew very pale; --but I talked more fluently, 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; but the noise steadily increased. Why would they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men --but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! what could I do? I foamed --I raved --I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder --louder --louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! --no, no! They heard! --they suspected! --they knew! --they were making a mockery of my horror!--this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! and now --again! --hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!

"Villains!" I shrieked, "dissemble no more! I admit the deed! --tear up the planks! here, here! --It is the beating of his hideous heart!"

Revisiting the story:

Q1: Who do you think is the narrator speaking to? What does he expect from the reader?

Q2: How does the narrator encourage the old man to have confidence in him?

Q3: Compare the logical explanation for the old man's condition of his eye with the narrator's own interpretation.

Q4: Speculate on the relationship between the old man and the narrator. Why is there no background information about this in the story?

Q5: Explore the concept of psychosomatic pain / schizophrenia and how it relates to the story.

Q6: Is the narrator a reliable source of information? Explain your position based on evidence from the text.

Q7: Interpret the title of the story. Discuss why it is an appropriate and ironic title.

Q8: What would you say are the themes in this story?

Beyond the text:

Q9: The story ends with the narrator's confessing to the police officers who come to the old man's house. What do you imagine happened to the narrator after that? To whom do you think he is speaking now? What will his future be? Write an epilogue for the story that seems reasonable to you, based on what you know about the narrator and his crime.

Q10: Gothic literature is a type of fiction noted for certain elements, such as death, darkness, horror, mystery, suspense, terror, the supernatural, and characters who feel intense emotions. Identify and describe the various gothic elements in this story.

Q11: The passage of time is a **motif** in the story. What is the time frame of the various events in the narrative? How does the author create suspense by alluding to the passage of time in various places in the story? (inner time VS outer time)

Q12: The story is written in the **first-person point of view** from the perspective of the murderer. Do you think it is the most effective point of view to employ in writing the story? Why or why not? How would the story be different if it were written in a different point of view?

Q13: Did you enjoy the story? Did it hold your interest? Discuss what you thought and felt as you read it. What would you tell someone else about this particular story?

Vocabulary:

acute: ending in a sharp point

Above all was the sense of hearing **acute**.

arouse: call forth, as an emotion, feeling, or response

A shriek had been heard by a neighbour during the night; suspicion of foul play had been **aroused**; information had been lodged at the police office, and they (the officers) had been deputed to search the premises.

awe: an overwhelming feeling of wonder or admiration

It was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with **awe**.

cease: put an end to a state or an activity

At length it **ceased**.

chamber: a natural or artificial enclosed space

And this I did for seven long nights, every night just at midnight, but I found the eye always closed, and so it was impossible to do the work, for it was not the old man who vexed me but his Evil Eye. And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the **chamber** and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he had passed the night.

chuckle: a soft partly suppressed laugh

I fairly **chuckled** at the idea, and perhaps he heard me, for he moved on the bed suddenly as if startled.

conceive: have the idea for

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

crevice: a long narrow opening

When I had waited a long time very patiently without hearing him lie down, I resolved to open a little -- a very, very little **crevice** in the lantern.

deed: a legal document to effect a transfer of property

To think that there I was opening the door little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret **deeds** or thoughts.

derision: the act of treating with contempt

Anything was more tolerable than this **derision**!

detect: discover or determine the existence, presence, or fact of

I then replaced the boards so cleverly so cunningly, that no human eye -- not even his -- could have **detected** anything wrong.

dim: lacking in light; not bright or harsh

So I opened it -- you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily -- until at length a single **dim** ray like the thread of the spider shot out from the crevice and fell upon the vulture eye.

dissemble: behave unnaturally or affectedly

I shrieked, " **dissemble** no more!

distinct: constituting a separate entity or part

The ringing 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.

envelop: enclose or enfold completely with or as if with a covering

ALL IN VAIN, because Death in approaching him had stalked with his black shadow before him and **enveloped** the victim.

fancy: not plain; decorative or ornamented

You **fancy** me mad.

fatigue: temporary loss of strength and energy from hard work

In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them here to rest from their **fatigues**, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim.

foul: highly offensive; arousing aversion or disgust

A shriek had been heard by a neighbour during the night; suspicion of **foul** play had been aroused; information had been lodged at the police office, and they (the officers) had been deputed to search the premises.

gaze: a long fixed look

It was open, wide, wide open, and I grew furious as I **gazed** upon it.

gesticulation: a deliberate and vigorous motion of the hands or body

I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent **gesticulations**; but the noise steadily increased.

hearty: showing warm and sincere friendliness

And this I did for seven long nights, every night just at midnight, but I found the eye always closed, and so it was impossible to do the work, for it was not the old man who vexed me but his Evil Eye. And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a **hearty** tone, and inquiring how he had passed the night.

hypocritical: professing feelings or virtues one does not have

I could bear those **hypocritical** smiles no longer!

maintain: keep in a certain state, position, or activity

I tried how steadily I could **maintain** the ray upon the eye.

mortal: subject to death

Presently, I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of **mortal** terror.

premise: a statement that is held to be true

A shriek had been heard by a neighbour during the night; suspicion of foul play had been aroused; information had been lodged at the police office, and they (the officers) had been deputed to search the **premises**.

proceed: move ahead; travel onward in time or space

You should have seen how wisely I **proceeded** -- with what caution -- with what foresight, with what dissimulation, I went to work!

profound: situated at or extending to great depth

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.

rave: talk in a noisy, excited, or declamatory manner

I foamed -- I **raved** -- I swore!

refrain: resist doing something

But even yet I **refrained** and kept still.

repose: freedom from activity

In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them here to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which **reposed** the corpse of the victim.

resolve: find a solution or answer

When I had waited a long time very patiently without hearing him lie down, I **resolved** to open a little -- a very, very little crevice in the lantern.

sagacity: Klugheit, Weisheit

stalk: a slender or elongated structure that supports a plant

ALL IN VAIN, because Death in approaching him had **stalked** with his black shadow before him and enveloped the victim.

stifle: impair the respiration of or obstruct the air passage of

It was the low **stifled** sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe.

stimulate: cause to act in a specified manner

It increased my fury as the beating of a drum **stimulates** the soldier into courage.

suavity: the quality of being charming and gracious in manner

There entered three men, who introduced themselves, with perfect **suavity**, as officers of the police.

sufficient: of a quantity that can fulfill a need or requirement

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.

supposition: the cognitive process of conjecturing

Yes he has been trying to comfort himself with these **suppositions** ; but he had found all in vain.

vain: having an exaggerated sense of self-importance

Yes he has been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions ; but he had found all in **vain**.

vex: disturb, especially by minor irritations

And this I did for seven long nights, every night just at midnight, but I found the eye always closed, and so it was impossible to do the work, for it was not the old man who **vexed** me but his Evil Eye. And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he had passed the night.

wane: a gradual decline (in size or strength or power or number)

The night **waned**, and I worked hastily, but in silence.

wary: marked by keen caution and watchful prudence

I had been too **wary** for that.