



## The Tell-Tale Heart

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A nameless, first-person narrator tells, in initially cool but increasingly desperate tones, the story of his calculating murder of an old man for whose care he was responsible. His reason for telling the tale is to prove to the reader, whom he addresses directly, that he is not insane. In the telling, however, he demonstrates a perversity that not only reveals his mental imbalance, but also confronts the reader with the possibility of evil at the core of every human being.

“THE TELL-TALE HEART” exemplifies perfectly Poe’s notion of “unity of effect,” the conviction that every line of a story should contribute to a single, unrelieved effect on the reader. This is illustrated, as Poe insisted it should be, in the very first line: “True!--nervous--very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?”

Poe precedes Dostoevsky and modern writers in exploring motiveless evil. The narrator quickly informs us that he killed the old man for none of the usual reasons but only because he could not stand the look of the man’s blinded eye.

Poe’s primary interest, however, is not evil in the theological sense but as a species of psychological obsession. His fascination is with the working of the human mind, with the relation between hyperrationality and madness, and with a bent in human nature that all our reason cannot explain away. All of these are connected in the story with the incessant beating of the old man’s heart that even death cannot still.

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