

The Tell-Tale Heart

by Edgar Allan Poe



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Notes

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Poe's stories and poems are remarkable, not only for an unusual anxiety about life, a preoccupation with loss, an all-consuming terror, and a unique perspective on death, but also for their rich mixture of beauty, the sensual, and the supernatural. Many readers wonder whether Poe's odd perspectives were the result of his unconventional lifestyle, but the debate over whether drugs or alcohol fueled his imagination and caused his death is inconclusive.

Most modern critics recognize the emotional difficulties that Poe experienced in his life, but they also doubt that binge drinking and opium use were the inspirations for his fascination with the macabre. It is just as likely that Poe's series of wrenching losses contributed to a lifelong struggle with depression. His mother and two other women who served as mother figures to him, died prematurely. His wife was ill for years before she succumbed to tuberculosis, and a fiancée rejected him.

It is obvious that an artist as sensitive as Poe would reflect this pain in his writings. In addition, it is well known that he revised his work painstakingly. The hours that Poe spent revising his work also belie any claim that his work was the product of something other than his own innate genius and craftsmanship.

Poet, storyteller, respected literary critic—Poe was and still remains one of the defining contributors to American literature. It is our hope that this collection will not only afford you the opportunity to revisit some of your favorite Poe writings, but also give you the chance to experience a side of his genius that, perhaps, you never knew existed.

Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 19, 1809. Both his mother, Elizabeth Arnold Poe, and his father, David Poe, Jr., were employed as actors in the Boston Theatre. After his father abandoned the family and his mother's death a year later, Poe was taken in by Mr. and Mrs. John Allan, but they never adopted him. While they lived in England, Poe and his stepfather began to argue fiercely and frequently. Mrs. Allan died, John remarried, and he and Poe became even further estranged.

In 1826, Poe began attending the University of Virginia, but was expelled later that year. He attended West Point for a short time; while there, he accumulated some gambling debts. John Allan would not help pay them and Poe left the Academy. He went to Boston in 1827 and, finding that he could not support himself, enlisted in the United States Army under the name Edgar A. Perry. After two years, he was released and moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where his maternal relatives lived. During this period, newspapers and literary magazines began to publish Poe's work. *Tamerlaine and Other Poems* appeared in 1827 and *Al Aaraaf* in 1829. His *Manuscript Found in a Bottle* won a literary contest in 1833.

Three years later, however, his life would change drastically. In May of 1836, he married his 14-year-old cousin, Virginia Clemm, who convinced Poe to settle in Philadelphia, where he obtained regular employment as an editor. In 1844, Poe moved to New York City, taking a job as editor for another literary magazine, *The Evening Mirror*. His most famous and popular poem, *The Raven*, was published in this magazine; through this one poem, Poe finally achieved his well-deserved reputation as a great writer. In January of 1847, however,

after a long illness, Virginia died of tuberculosis. Poe's grief, combined with the stress caused by years of caring for his invalid wife, caused him to collapse emotionally after her death; it is believed that this loss accelerated his drinking problem.

Yet two years later, in 1849, he moved back to Richmond and planned to wed Sarah Elmira Royster Shelton, a woman Poe had been engaged to marry earlier in life. (John Allan had forced Poe to abandon any thoughts of marrying her because of a lack of money.) Poe and Shelton, both now having lost a spouse, renewed their relationship. They would, however, not marry due to Poe's untimely death, the circumstances of which remain a mystery, even today.

He had left Richmond for Baltimore on September 27, 1849, and was found unconscious in a gutter there on October 3rd. Poe had collected approximately \$1,500 for subscriptions to his literary magazine, *The Stylus*, but no money was found with him, leading to the speculation that he might have been robbed. He was taken to a hospital where he regained consciousness a few times, but Poe was never coherent enough to explain what had happened to him. Edgar Allan Poe died on October 7, 1849.

One doctor reported to the newspapers that Poe died from a “congestion of the brain.” Poe was known to have a tendency toward binge drinking; this, along with the subject matter of his stories and poems, caused many contemporaries to speculate that alcohol or drugs played a role in his death, but the truth may never be known. Some modern critics speculate that he might have been an undiagnosed diabetic. Other theories include the possibility of a brain lesion. One historian theorizes that Poe was kidnapped, given alcohol, beaten, and forced to vote time and again for sheriff; this was called “cooping” and was a practice in Baltimore elections at the time. The possibility also exists that Poe encountered a spurned lover, who wounded him in the neck. What is certain, however, is that Edgar Allan Poe left behind an enduring legacy of work that will long outlive the circumstances of his death.

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

As you read these stories and poems, pay attention to the following:

Poe's depiction of death:

- Death is not only inevitable, but it also can be beautiful, especially as it is portrayed in the poems.
- Death can be horrific when someone realizes it is imminent.
- Guilt, hatred, or revenge are appropriate justifications for murder.
- Impending death can be postponed, but not always.
- Death may actually enhance a loved one's beauty.

Poe's portrayal of love and beauty, especially in the poems:

- Love is chosen by the individual, not determined merely by fate.
- Love has historical, sometimes mythological, references.
- Love has no boundaries, not even in death.
- Beauty is only an idea, one that even death cannot weaken.
- Beauty in its ideal form cannot be attained.

Poe's innovative and unusual use of words in both genres:

- Words are frequently used for the way they sound, as well as for their meanings.
- Poe's rhythm and internal rhyme becomes almost hypnotic in many poems.
- The difficult vocabulary reflects the style of Poe's time period.
- Every important word is intended to evoke a mood or atmosphere in the reader, and Poe aimed for the same effect regardless of whether the work was prose or poetry.

Poe's ability to instill fear in the reader, primarily in the short stories:

- Poe builds suspense throughout the stories, revealing some facts while withholding others.
- Because the element of danger is usually present, the reader can feel the intensity of the emotions.
- The narration is frequently first person, which makes the reader's connection to the story more intimate.
- Poe's descriptions are usually minutely detailed to give a sense of verisimilitude to the stories, despite their supernatural atmosphere.
- The use of irony and black humor is common.
- Gothic elements are usually prominent in his writing: the supernatural, evil animals, and dark, gloomy settings
- Poe's depictions of how the human mind works heighten a reader's connection to the story.
- The surprise endings provide a reason to go back through the work to look for clues missed on the first reading.

The Tell-Tale Heart

TRUE!—NERVOUS—VERY, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever.

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

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.

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.

And 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.

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!

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.

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!”