

The Tell-Tale Heart - Critical Analysis

Imagine the sight of an old man's eye, vulturous, pale blue, with a film covering it. Could this drive one's self so insane that one would murder a man because of it? This is the event that occurs in Edgar Allen Poe's vivid tale "The Tell-Tale Heart", from the book *Designs For Reading: Short Stories*.

Every night at precisely midnight, the narrator, who remains nameless and sexless, but for the sake of this essay I will refer to as he, ventured into the old man's room without making a sound, to observe the very eye at which the sight of made his blood run cold. The old man did not suspect a thing. During the day the narrator continued to go about his daily routine, and even went so far as to ask the old man every morning if he slept well the night before. Upon the eighth midnight of this nightly ritual, the narrator proceeded to the old man's room as usual; however, this night was different. As he slipped cat-like into the room, the old man sat up suddenly in his bed, crying out "Who's there?" The narrator stood there silently for over an hour, as did the old man who did not lie back down. Finally he opened the lantern ever so slightly, letting in only a single dim ray, only to see that the eye was wide open. "It was 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."(p. 153). Then suddenly he heard "a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton."(p 154). This prompted the narrator to leap into the room, drag the old man off the bed, and pulled the heavy bed over him. After carefully checking to make sure that the man was dead, he proceeded to chop up the body, and discretely bury the pieces under the planks of the floor. Not long after, the police came because of a shriek reported by a neighbor. The narrator invited the officers in and sat them right on the spot where he'd disposed of the corpse. Everything was fine, he was calm and at ease, as the officers chatted away. He soon wished them to be gone, for as the "low, dull, quick sound□ much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton,"(p. 155) became louder and louder, until he could bare it no longer, and he finally shrieked, "Villains! Dissemble no more! I admit the deed! Tear up the planks!-- here, here! -- It is the beating of his hideous heart."(p. 156).

"The Tell-Tale Heart" is a short and to the point story, with every word contributing to the central issue, which combines the narrator's previous terror's, the old man's current terrors, and the terrors for the narrator yet to come. The setting and characters are not the main focus of the story. The setting is basically irrelevant; all that is known is that it is the home of an elderly man in which the narrator is his caretaker, and most of the action occurs each night around midnight. Poe has chosen to be very elusive with these characters. They remain nameless throughout the story, being given only the titles of "the narrator" and "the old man". We're not even sure whether the narrator is male or female. The author uses "I" and "me" in reference to the character, and being male, we assume that the subject is male. Since the story is written in first person point of view, the protagonist is indirectly characterized. One must infer what he is like by what he says and does, although in this example the two are contradicting. The narrator insists that he is not insane. "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!"(p. 151). Yet it is obvious by his actions□ the fact that he murdered an innocent old man because of his "evil eye"-- that he is neurotic and mentally imbalanced. The narrator's motivation for killing the man is notably obscure. "It is impossible to say how the first idea entered my brain... Object there was none. Passion there was none.

I loved the man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire."(p. 151). The only motivation for killing the man was his deformed eye.

Poe's tale is complete with strong foreshadowing, subtle irony, and vivid symbolism. The symbolism and irony lead to an enormously improved story as compared to a story with the same plot but with these two elements missing, while the foreshadowing adds to the suspense. The very first paragraph is full of foreshadowing. "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."(p. 151). I believe this foreshadows the fate of the narrator. Although we do not actually find out what happens to him, we know it will be profane. It is also foreshadowing his insane mannerism. Another example of foreshadowing is in the second paragraph, when he says "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." This clearly states his intentions, but it foreshadows the eye as being the incentive. The sound of the watch ticking foreshadows the death of the old man.

The irony in the story is in the second sentence of the first paragraph; the narrator says "The disease had sharpened my senses□ not destroyed, not dulled them."(p. 151). In my opinion this is ironic, because he believed that his insanity was an asset to his situation, when really it brought about his downfall. Had he not been so self-assured that his scheme would be flawless because of his "heightened senses", he invariably would not have ended up in turmoil. This brings about the next point; it was ironic that after all of his careful planning, he ended up admitting to the police that he had killed the man.

Symbolism is an important aspect of the story. The major symbol is the heartbeat. The narrator believed that the sound was the beating of the old man's heart, but it was actually his own heartbeat, signifying his fear of being caught, and his guilty conscience tormenting him for killing the old man. The vulturous, blue veiled eye clearly represents evil, the evil that the narrator saw in the eye that he was trying to eliminate.

A theme of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is that human nature is a delicate balance of light and dark, or good and evil. Most of the time this precarious proportion is maintained; however, when there is a shift, for whatever reason, the dark or perverse side emerges. How and why this dark side arises differs from person to person. What may push one individual over the edge will only cause another to raise an eyebrow.

Poe uses his words economically in the "Tell-Tale Heart"—it is one of his shortest stories—to provide a study of paranoia and mental deterioration. Poe strips the story of excess detail as a way to heighten the murderer's obsession with specific and unadorned entities: the old man's eye, the heartbeat, and his own claim to sanity. Poe's economic style and pointed language thus contribute to the narrative content, and perhaps this association of form and content truly exemplifies paranoia. Even Poe himself, like the beating heart, is complicit in the plot to catch the narrator in his evil game.

As a study in paranoia, this story illuminates the psychological contradictions that contribute to a murderous profile. For example, the narrator admits, in the first sentence, to being dreadfully nervous, yet he is unable to comprehend why he should be thought mad. He articulates his self-defense against madness in terms of heightened sensory capacity. Unlike the similarly nervous and hypersensitive

Roderick Usher in "The Fall of the House of Usher," who admits that he feels mentally unwell, the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" views his hypersensitivity as proof of his sanity, not a symptom of madness. This special knowledge enables the narrator to tell this tale in a precise and complete manner, and he uses the stylistic tools of narration for the purposes of his own sanity plea. However, what makes this narrator mad—and most unlike Poe—is that he fails to comprehend the coupling of narrative form and content. He masters precise form, but he unwittingly lays out a tale of murder that betrays the madness he wants to deny.

Another contradiction central to the story involves the tension between the narrator's capacities for love and hate. Poe explores here a psychological mystery—that people sometimes harm those whom they love or need in their lives. Poe examines this paradox half a century before Sigmund Freud made it a leading concept in his theories of the mind. Poe's narrator loves the old man. He is not greedy for the old man's wealth, nor vengeful because of any slight. The narrator thus eliminates motives that might normally inspire such a violent murder. As he proclaims his own sanity, the narrator fixates on the old man's vulture-eye. He reduces the old man to the pale blue of his eye in obsessive fashion. He wants to separate the man from his "Evil Eye" so he can spare the man the burden of guilt that he attributes to the eye itself. The narrator fails to see that the eye is the "I" of the old man, an inherent part of his identity that cannot be isolated as the narrator perversely imagines.

The murder of the old man illustrates the extent to which the narrator separates the old man's identity from his physical eye. The narrator sees the eye as completely separate from the man, and as a result, he is capable of murdering him while maintaining that he loves him. The narrator's desire to eradicate the man's eye motivates his murder, but the narrator does not acknowledge that this act will end the man's life. By dismembering his victim, the narrator further deprives the old man of his humanity. The narrator confirms his conception of the old man's eye as separate from the man by ending the man altogether and turning him into so many parts. That strategy turns against him when his mind imagines other parts of the old man's body working against him.

The narrator's newly heightened sensitivity to sound ultimately overcomes him, as he proves unwilling or unable to distinguish between real and imagined sounds. Because of his warped sense of reality, he obsesses over the low beats of the man's heart yet shows little concern about the man's shrieks, which are loud enough both to attract a neighbor's attention and to draw the police to the scene of the crime. The police do not perform a traditional, judgmental role in this story. Ironically, they aren't terrifying agents of authority or brutality. Poe's interest is less in external forms of power than in the power that pathologies of the mind can hold over an individual. The narrator's paranoia and guilt make it inevitable that he will give himself away. The police arrive on the scene to give him the opportunity to betray himself. The more the narrator proclaims his own cool manner, the more he cannot escape the beating of his own heart, which he mistakes for the beating of the old man's heart. As he confesses to the crime in the final sentence, he addresses the policemen as "[v]illains," indicating his inability to distinguish between their real identity and his own villainy.

